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ABSTRACT

Sharing poems that celebrate books and reading throughout the school year can foster enjoyment of poetry as well as appreciation for reading. A variety of easy to read poems exist that vary from old and new, long and short, free-flowing verse and rhymed verse, and for young children as well as older children. Such poems can be read at odd moments of the day or built into a resource for a thematic unit. These poems deal with such topics as males in a caregiver role, teacher as nurturer, reading and sensory details, books that open the imagination, reading to be informed, "reading is a trip," reading and recognition of self, and humor. (Contains 12 references and 54 sources for poems and poetry books.) (RS)

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by Glasceta Honeyghan

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Exploring Literacy Through Poetry: Poems That Celebrate Reading

Glasceta Honeyghan

Sharing poems about books and reading throughout the school year can foster enjoyment of poetry as well as appreciation for reading.

"Literature entices, motivates, and instructs. It opens doors to discovery and provides endless hours of adventure and enjoyment (Norton, 1998). Good books open the doors of our imagination, and in themselves are valuable (Brown, Tomlinson, 1993). How about poetry as a literary form? The subject matter of children's literature can be expressed in prose or poetry, and often a poem is the shortest piece of literature that is a whole text. However, observations show that, especially as children get older, poetry is their least preferred literary material (Gunning, 1996; Mclure, Harrison, and Reed, 1990), due largely to teaching practices (Galda, 1993; Terry, 1974).

On the discussion of the value of poetry for children, many agree that children have a natural affinity to rhyme and rhythm--rhythm that they are exposed to in nursery rhymes, playground jump-rope chants, hand-clapping games, circle games, taunts and teases. To the extent that children enjoy poetry, researchers such as Ann Terry (1974) and others have demonstrated that children enjoy contemporary poems that are humorous and are about familiar experiences, animals and people. Then, many instructional innovators agree with Rosenblatt's theory (1938, 1978) of the literary transaction centering around the interaction between reader and text, and its implication for teaching poetry in the early grades, where personal responses and interpretations are encouraged. For instance, Koch (1990) highlighted those things in poetry to which young readers/writers will be able to connect, helping them find perception, ideas, feelings, and new ways of seeing things. More recently, Bass-Nelson (1991) showed results that using poetry daily with kindergartners can increase their poetry skills and curriculum cognition; use of phonology, alliteration, and rhyme can facilitate early reading ability.

Likewise, in other areas, the development and benefits of using poetry are discussed. Among others, Spinner (1986) explains how one teacher developed a method for teaching poetry successfully in high school through which she inspired an all-male remedial class to take pride in their own poems. Hicks (1990) notes that poetry continues to be one form of reading that special education high school students seem to enjoy, and Gardner (1993) describes how through various exercises, oral recitations, and conversations, troubled teens learned basic writing skills that helped them gain control over their emotions. Honeyghan's study (1995) in a community college found that exposure to reading and writing poetry changed students' attitudes toward poetry.

What happens when you combine the enjoyment of poetry with a clear message that celebrates books and literacy? Children revel in the excitement and share the delight in the playful humor and rhyme of words, while absorbing a message about reading. The process can only enhance enjoyment and develop a fondness for poetry and a wholesome attitude towards books and reading.

In my role as teacher/professor/writer, I have a strong interest in using poetry with children, and I often celebrate poetry with my preservice teachers. Included in our celebration are poems that celebrate literacy, expressions that will help children develop positive attitudes toward reading and literature, connect them to something that, quite understandably, has become part of their very daily survival, and will affirm the important contribution that reading plays in our lives and culture.

My criteria for selection is largely determined by the poet Robert Francis who reminds us that a poem is like an arrow, meaning, a good poem should affect a reader in some way. In this sense, I hope the message might be twofold: (1) poetry of itself can be enjoyed, and (2) the power of its message might draw children into reading books and becoming lifelong readers.

The poems discussed below are easy to read aloud to a whole class with no need for analysis. Simple enjoyment of the rhyme and rhythm that pervade children's lives is sufficient. The poems vary from old and new, long and short, free-flowing verse and rhymed verse, for young children as well as older children, by acclaimed poets as well as new voices, written by adults as well as children, and poems that display a variety of poetic elements. But the message is clear that books are important and can be enjoyed. A few poems such as Farris' (1970) "If you give a child a book." and Layne's (1994), "Reading: From a teacher's heart" appear to be preachy and seem to express ideas and concerns from teacher-to-teacher, but they can be appreciated and enjoyed by older children.

Whether about your judgments of books as in More's (1993), "A book," in Silverstein's (1974), "Overdue," or in Robinson's (1956), "Picture Book," the message seems to make children aware of the delight

to be found in books and poems, delight they can enjoy through being read to aloud or that they can provide for themselves through reading good books. We get an image of reading--whether it is a child in the stone age or medieval times sitting under a tree or on a bench, or a modern-day child being tucked into a cozy bed and listening to the reading of a cherished bed time story, children sitting in a circle in a classroom, or a story striking up a chord and drawing back the adult reader into the child's world, we see an attitude of joy and adventure, the power of the book to draw us in, carry us away, let us escape from our immediate surroundings into a world of imagination.

These poems can be read at odd moments of the day or built into a resource for a thematic unit. Teachers who are somewhat reluctant to teach poetry for fear they lack knowledge or might over-analyze will find they can successfully read aloud naturally, where children can listen aesthetically and learn to feel the poem and see its images. This can be beneficial since frequent, casual encounters with poetry can make it seem a natural and necessary experience (Galda, 1992; Larrick 1992). Teachers who feel the need to require more thoughtful responses or to help students become aware of the subtle things poets do to enrich meaning, might want to look more closely at Dickinson's "There is no frigate like a book" (1961), in which she uses simple ordinary language in inventive ways that hold meaning beyond the words themselves. In her poem she compares literature to various means of transportation: a boat, a team of horses, a wheeled land vehicle. The meaning of the poem comes from her careful selection of kinds of transportation that have romantic connotations: "frigate," suggesting exploration and adventure; "coursers," suggesting beauty, spirit, and speed; "chariot," suggesting speed and ability to go through air as well as over land.

Poems that Celebrate Reading

MOTHER AS NURTURER IN READING

When Mother Reads Aloud
When Mother reads aloud, the past
Seems real as every day;
I hear the tramp of armies vast,
I see the spears and lances cast,
I join the thrilling fray;
Brave knights and ladies fair and proud
I meet when Mother reads aloud.

When Mother reads aloud, far lands
Seem very near and true;
I cross the desert's gleaming sands,
Or hunt the jungles prowling bands,
Or sail the ocean blue.
Far heights, whose peaks the cold mists shroud,
I scale, when Mother reads aloud.

When Mother reads aloud, I long
For noble deeds to do--
To help the right, redress the wrong;
It seems so easy to be strong,
So simple to be true.
Oh, thick and fast the visions crowd
My eyes, when Mother reads aloud.

--Anonymous

In this delightful verse (1957) the mother fulfills a warm, protective, and consistent caregiving role, and reading a book to her child is an essential part of bonding between mother and child. This exercise is associated with influencing children with early reading, and moving them to emergent reading behaviors. Whitman's "I hear my mother's voice (1988) and Gillian's "The reading mother" (1936) share a similar message.

Male's Presence/Reader in Caregiving Role

Robert Lois Stevenson's poems have helped warm children's hearts with much delight over the years. In Ashead and Duff's collection *An Inheritance of Poetry* (1948), Stevenson's short poem "Go little book" (unpaged) uses the dramatic voice and anthropomorphizes a book. The speaker gives it [the book] advice: "Go little book, and wish to all/flowers in the garden, meat in the hall." The poem is graceful and subtle, and the mood suggests the hearth of a home conducive to pleasurable reading: "bin of wine," "a house with lawns enclosing it," "A living river by the door."

Of course, Stevenson is a male poet using his speaker to express strong feelings about a book, but included in his collection *A child's book of verses* (1947) are three poems that celebrate reading. "Picture books in winter" (p.78), "The land of story books" (p.76), and "To any reader"(p.118) are poems that celebrate reading. These three poems provide a positive portrayal of boys and reading. Two fine illustrations depict boys, one sitting on his mother's lap.

Although the mother does the reading in Gillian's "The Reading Mother" (Hellman, 1936), the speaker is a boy--"That wholesome life to the boy heart brings," "Oh, that each mother of boys were such!" Steely's "The Reading Father" (1995), Garcia's "Bedtime Stories" (1998), Fisher's "On a summer's day" (1990), and Jackson's "I've got a book from my Grandfather Hyde" (1957) provide a similar positive image of males involved in nurturing reading.

The Teacher-Reader as Nurturer

Pawlowski's "Paradise found" (1984) is a poem that encourages the reader to see, hear, feel, taste, and smell the world created by reading a book. The poem begins "Our teacher read a book to us," and you get the feel of a child listening to an interesting book being read aloud by a teacher, indicating children's reading ability being nourished by the teacher. It is noteworthy that the teacher is perceived as the positive role model, the warm, consistent, reliable caregiver who nurtures reading. In a world today that is plagued with conditions facing children such as single-parent households, divorced parents, too-busy parents who cannot afford the time, lack the ability or inclination to share the world of literature with children, the teacher continues to play an important role.

There are several poems that express similar sentiments, explicitly or implicity. Among them are Waites' "Reading aloud" (1996), Layne's "Reading: From a teacher's heart" (1994), Woleck's "The fun in Room 103 (1999), Miness' "I can read" (1999), Carr-Lambert's "Jeffrey's need" (1998), Rice's "Read aloud time" (1994), Korlan's "Winners" (1994), Layne's "Read to them" (1994), and Farris' "If you give a child a book...literacy lessons for teachers" (1997).

Reading and Sensory Details

To be further observed, in Pawlowski's "Paradise found," the teacher reads with feeling and enjoyment in a well-modulated voice: "And as she read the words, her voice/Got loud, then soft and slow/She made this place sound like a place/Where I would like to go." And as the teacher reads, the child is reveling in the experience and recreating it, using vivid senses to capture the imagery. We too share the experience through sharp and representative details: the sight is awakened to "the green of trees that touch the sky," the hearing evoked to "the sharp and haunting wild ones' cry" the smell and taste recalled through "fragrance sweet of flowers hanging low," and "The fruit that grew were tasted great/Its juice dripped down my chin," and the touch is sensitized through "I felt damp, warm, heavy air/That made my breathing slow." Heitz's "In a book" (1997) and Moore's "A book" (1993) invite children to read and bathe their senses.

Finally "In Paradise Found," the child is back to the real world in the classroom. "My name, again, rang in my ears/It slapped me in the face/And there I was, in school again/Oh what an arid place." And clearly, we see the child's appreciation for literature, where she enjoys the story so much, she plans to check the book out of the class or school library: "But I'll return to green and wild/To have another look/As soon as I can borrow it/and walk into that book." Reese's "A Book" (1956) works well with figures of speech where a book is compared to "a flower that blows," "a road to a far town," "a roof," "a well," "a tower," "a staff," and "a crook."

The vivid language, fresh and full imagery, and figures of speech can acquaint children with new ways of describing what they see, feel, and hear.

Books Opening the Imagination

In Brown and Tomlinson's *Essentials of Children's Literature* (1993), Wynne uses four lines in "My book holds many stories," to express a personal value of literature to children: reading a book opens the door of imagination---... "Until I come to take it [book]; then soon my book and I/are sailing on a fairy sea or floating in the sky." The terms 'fairy sea' and 'floating' link books to magic and wonder tales such as Cinderella, where the fairy godmother transforms the kind, mistreated girl into a beautiful princess.

In McCord's "Books fall open" (1993), the speaker helps the reader see that reading true books can affect you. The poet's attitude toward reading is one of joy, wonder, and adventure. When you read, you can go to new places, hear new voices, find new thoughts and ideas: "Books fall open/you fall in/delighted where you've never been/hear voices not once/heard before/reach world on world/through open door." And "You fall in" is suggesting that when you read a good book you become completely absorbed by it. Books unlock information beyond your imagination: "Keys to things/locked up beyond/imaginings." Children can celebrate similar sentiments in Farjeon's "Books" (1956).

Lee Bennett Hopkins has edited many poetry collections on a wide variety of subjects. His collection *Good Books, Good Times!* (1993) celebrates reading in all ways to be enjoyed. His work featuring 14 poems combines playful humor and rhyme with more complex word play and includes poems from a range of poets including Prelutsky, Livingston, McCord, and Kuskin. Illustrated by Harvey Stevenson, the poems are accompanied by watercolor pictures and are easily accessible. Some pages have no words, allowing the reader's imagination to take off to a land "where rolls and giants dwell," "where carpets fly," "of magic folks and deeds" (p.25). Kuskin's "Being Lost" (p.5), Livingston's "Give me a book" (p.13), and Hopkins' "*Good Books, Good Times!*" (p.17) express similar sentiments regarding a book's ability to help children escape from their immediate surroundings into a world of imagination. Prelutsky's "I met a dragon face to face" (p.22), Jacobs' "There is a land" (p.25), Glaser's "What if..."(p.21), and Kennedy's "I'd like a story" (p.27) continue with the magical and musical ability of books

to carry the reader away, and the reader enjoys the risk and thrills of adventure of diverse topics such as dragons, pirates, dinosaurs, and unicorns that are not part of childhood but are of interest to children.

Kuskin's "Thoughts were put into words" (1990) extends an invitation to shared reading activity with a parent, librarian, teacher, or peer: "At the edge of the edge/You and I/Turn the page/Read its message."

Picture Books

"I don't like reading much/but the pictures that I see/are full of meanings/the words don't have for me." Robinson's "Picture books" (1956) provides children with an introduction to picture books that are seen as a response to children's developing awareness of the importance of early learning that is essential to enjoying and understanding a story. Children enjoy opportunities to provide the missing text, or to help writing stories to accompany pictures. Picture books stimulate creative thinking and involve visual literacy abilities. Stevenson's "Picture books" (1947) shares a similar observation.

Reading to be Informed

Children need to appreciate the main purposes of reading, which are to read for pleasure, information, and survival. Maria Blackwell's "Your future is an open book" (1994) takes the child's literary experience beyond the fast-moving, adventure-filled stories to quality nonfiction books of new interests and knowledge about virtually every topic imaginable. The aesthetic as well as the efferent perspective is conveyed. Hannah More's "A book" (1993) explores learning about books--different parts or elements and how they work together to convey meaning and purpose. And Browning's "Reading" shows how books can provide one with opportunities to experience enjoyable, exciting, and thought-provoking literature and, in turn, respond or express his reactions to the experience in some way: "We gloriously forget ourselves and plunge/soul-forward, headlong, into a book's profound/ Impassioned for its beauty and salt of truth--/'Tis then we get the right from a good book."

Reading is a Trip

Lipsky's "Reading is a trip" (1994) is a magical excursion. Reading a book is compared to taking a trip. The reader is driver; the author is the guide: "My seat belt's strapped to/As my body becomes motionless," "Now I hold the world in my two hands/And the author is my guide." Then the book takes the dreamer on a fantasy tour in which he explores uncharted lands: "Wow! Look at the beautiful jungle/And those ice mountains fly by." He continues to revel in the adventure and mystery of fantasy: "Where boys and girls are kings and queens/now that's a place to go! And you can catch any fish in the sea/or travel to any star in the sky." Then we see reading empowering the reader: "My mind and body leaps so!/Now, I hold the world in my two hands." Sloane's "A thousand places and more" (1998), and Murphy's "Read to Me" (1998) express a similar message of reading taking the reader on a trip.

Reading and Recognition of Self

Sheldon's "I just do books" (1994) provides another vision of reading. It is a refreshing poem that deals with a social concern and expresses knowledge about the self. In a world where children encounter social issues--AIDS, pollution, drugs, death and dying--minutely, whether through actual reality or on television, it is worth our while to allow poetry to express troubling concerns in beautiful thoughts. The speaker in this poem has a good recognition of self, of setting guidelines, of making a rational choice. He sees no need to take drugs, smoke weed or drink booze to get high, but instead gets high on a book: "If I want to get high/I just do a book." "Then I travel on word wings/Talk about high!/ I've gone hundred of miles/Beyond this blue sky." This poem is good to help children discover who they are, what they value, what they stand for. In this case when "things get tough," "Like when Mama is yelling/And Daddy's out late/Little brother is crying/And I've got to escape/I just open a book/And close out the world." On a lighter note, Silverstein's "Overdues" (1974) seems to read the mind of a child who knows what his conscience tells him, and Green's 'Which book?" (1997) looks at a child's ability to organize his actions, to make a decision.

The Library

McLoughland's "Surprise" (1990), Elizabeth Sills' "My favorite place" (1997) and Silverstein's "Overdues" (1974) can help heighten children's appreciation of the library and its link to reading and books.

Books and Humor

Children need to experience the delight and joy that comes with poems made up of humor and nonsense. Children will enjoy the humor in Silverstein's "Overdues" (1974), Viorst's "My--Oh wow!--Book" (1981) Spooner's "Close this book" (1993), Kalli Dakos' "Don't read this book, whatever you do!" (1993), and Lobel's "Books to the ceiling" (1990). In these poems a playful humor is combined with the seriousness of books and reading.

Conclusion

I hope as teachers read these poems, they might begin to extend possibilities to share them with children. For instance, besides generating rich discussions, teachers might want to encourage children to collect other poems celebrating reading, observe different forms of poetic devices, consider other poems by some of these same authors, and express their own excitement of literacy in poetry writing. In working on this project not only did I become intrigued by the volume of the collection of playful verses on reading, I caught the writing bug, and there arose a poetic possibility, which I believe, reflects my celebration of reading in a liberating sort of way.

BOOKS & BOUNDARIES

I'm crossing boundaries in a book,
From my lowly kitchen table;
I'm in a palace rich and able,

With my skin brown like dried coconut shell,
I'm mixing company with White and Yellow and well...
I'm crossing boundaries in a book,

Sitting here in my island home,
I'm in Australia, Greece, and Rome,
Roaming free and crossing boundaries of pages.

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